

# St Helen's Church Abingdon Oxfordshire



## Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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## St.Helen's Church, Abingdon, Oxfordshire

*Archaeological Watching Brief Report*

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## **Summary**

*From 30th January to 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2012 Oxford Archaeology conducted a watching brief during the construction of a new foul drain connection at St Helen's Church, Abingdon, Oxfordshire. The watching brief recorded the remains of three parallel north-south aligned stone walls within the garden of the present Church Centre, two of which were dated to the post-medieval period.*

*Within the present graveyard a backfilled vaulted brick tomb was recorded. No extant inhumations were disturbed along the route of the new service trench although the presence of human remains in the form of charnel was noted at several locations.*



## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by St Helen's Church to undertake an archaeological watching brief on the excavation of a trench for new foul drains in the northern churchyard following the installation of a WC and associated works at the church.
- 1.1.2 Due to the potential for disturbance of below-ground archaeological deposits and human burials a watching brief was required in order to mitigate the impact of the works.
- 1.1.3 An Archaeological Recording Specification (Munby 2012) was set by J.T.Munby, Oxford Diocesan Adviser which outlined the scope and objectives of the programme of archaeological recording and how it should be undertaken.

### 1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 St Helen's Church (NGR: SU 4985 9608) lies at the junction of West and East St Helen's Street in Abingdon immediately to the east of the confluence of the River Ock with the Thames (Fig. 1).
- 1.2.2 The underlying geology consists of terrace gravels overlying Kimmeridge Clay. The church stands on level ground at 53 m OD with a slope down to the River Thames 30 m to the south.

### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The Church of St Helens has been the subject of a Desk Top Assessment (OAU 1999) the results of which are summarised below.
- 1.3.2 St Helen's church lies within the historic and prehistoric core of Abingdon. Excavation has shown that Abingdon has been relatively densely occupied for approximately 2600 years.
- 1.3.3 Flint tools of the early Mesolithic period have been found on the edge of the Thames on the north side of Andersey Island and from the new Abbey House.
- 1.3.4 Groupings of flints and several sherds of Peterborough Ware from the area of the Abbey House indicate early occupation from this date nearby. This appears to have continued into the later Neolithic period with flints and a fragment of grooved ware being recovered from excavations in the Vineyard. It has been suggested that fragments of human skeletal material recovered in a recent evaluation of the Vineyard area may also be Neolithic in origin. Burials and ceremonial monuments of this period on higher ground overlooking a valley are typical and have been identified on the periphery of Abingdon's built up area on Radley Road, Daisy Banks and Caldecotte Road.
- 1.3.5 The main focus of Bronze Age activity continued to be around the known Neolithic monuments, with the development of barrow cemeteries on the periphery of the modern town. Finds attributable to the Bronze Age have also been recovered from the centre of Abingdon at the Abbey Day Centre, the Vineyard and close to the church on East St Helen's street.
- 1.3.6 Permanent large-scale settlement within Abingdon begins during the Early Iron Age in the vicinity of the Abbey House and encroached southwestwards to the area of the



church by the Middle Iron Age. A number of features of this date have been recorded on both West and East St Helen's street. By the Late Iron Age Abingdon was a thriving community enclosed by defensive ditches. A masonry building dating to before AD120 was excavated on East St Helen's street.

- 1.3.7 Occupation of the area continued throughout the Roman period though areas within the Iron Age town had fallen out of use by the end of the period indicating a possible decline
- 1.3.8 Roman occupation in the town's core was succeeded by an early Saxon settlement indicated by the presence of 5th century sunken featured buildings and Saxon pottery from sites under the Abbey House and Old Gaol. Sherds of Saxon grass tempered pottery were recovered from East St Helen's street.
- 1.3.9 Occupation within Abingdon continued throughout the Saxon period.
- 1.3.10 The church of St Helen is located in the southwest corner of the late Saxon town. Monastic chroniclers make the unusual admission that St Helen's pre dates the foundation of the Abbey, known to have been founded in AD 675 by Hean. St Helen's is said to have been founded as a nunnery by Hean's sister Cilla. St Helen is recognised as an early British saint who had a part in the discovery of the True Cross and as the mother of Constantine the Great. It is thought that she was born in either York or Colchester.
- 1.3.11 A church certainly stood on the present site by AD 995 when the Abbey chronicle records the sanctuary of a felon. By the time the parochial system was introduced St Helen's had an extensive parish encompassing the later chapelries of Radley, Drayton, Shippon and Dry Sandford. This extensive parish suggests that Great St Helen's was a primary parish and minster church with a separate jurisdiction from the Abbey which only possessed the advowson and only appropriated the rectory in AD 1261. The only matter that St Helen's deferred to the Abbey over during the post conquest period was that of burial rights. All townsmen continued to be buried in the abbey cemetery until the 16th century. A short hiatus apparently occurred in the mid 14th century, possibly in response to the black death. It is possible that burials pre-dating the appropriation of the burial rights by the Abbey exist close to the present church, possibly under the almshouses to the west that are built on church land.
- 1.3.12 No structural evidence for a pre-conquest church has been recorded on the site of St Helen's, If there was an early church on the site it would probably have stood in the location of the present outer north aisle. The Church was rebuilt in the 13th century and the tower and some features of the east wall are of this date. Further rebuilding took place in the 14th and 15th centuries and the structures visible in the northern four aisles date mainly to this period. The 13th and 14th century construction within the north aisle are of thin coursed limestone rubble, the later additions are of large ashlar masonry. The southernmost aisle and the south porch were added in the 16th century, a memorial plaque above the south door gives the date 1539, the year of a benefaction by Katherine Audlett of Barton. At this point the Abbey church was being demolished, following its dissolution, and it is feasible that stone from this was used in the construction of the new aisle.
- 1.3.13 The topography of this part of Abingdon suggests that some terracing may have been necessary when the church was extended to the south. Refurbishment in the 19th century caused below ground disturbance with the placement of heating ducts, organ power, drainage and a replacement of the original flooring. The font was moved to its





present location by the north door at this point. Recent observations have found cavities below the pew platforms.

- 1.3.14 As St Helen's is an important foundation within Abingdon it was considered likely that there would be a significant number of post 16th century burials below the 19th century flooring and in the graveyard. The excavation for graves and vaults would have severely disturbed pre-existing structures and archaeological deposits but it is considered possible that significant deposits could have survived in localised areas. Large masonry structures associated with earlier phases of the church, especially where walls were replaced by open arcades may have survived at least in part.

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The objectives of the watching brief were to:

- (i) Observe and record any exposed remains of the earlier church
- (ii) To determine the extent to which human remains survive in the affected area
- (iii) To generally observe and record the presence of burial vaults and graves
- (iv) To signal, before work proceeded, the discovery of an archaeological find for which further action was required
- (v) To provide a report and ordered archive on the investigation.

### 2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was undertaken in line with the requirements of the Specification set by the Diocesan Adviser (Munby 2012). Trench excavation by the appointed contractors was monitored at the start of the works and when deposits of potential historical significance were located
- 2.2.2 All features and deposits observed were issued with unique context numbers, and context recording was in accordance with established OA practices. Colour digital photographs were taken of all recorded sections and features together with a general record of the works.
- 2.2.3 Site plans were drawn at an appropriate scale (normally 1:50 or 1:100) with larger scale plans of features as necessary. Section drawings of features and sample sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 Work on the site consisted of the excavation of a new connecting service trench in the northern churchyard from new toilets within the north of the church to an existing manhole close to the Church Centre (Fig. 2).
- 3.1.2 The trench was 38m in length and measured 0.4 - 0.6m wide by 0.4 - 1.4m deep with the deepest section occurring midway across the churchyard.
- 3.1.3 The features and deposits recorded are also detailed in the context inventory (Appendix A).



- 3.1.4 The length of trench crossing the public footpath between the North Porch of the church and the churchyard had been heavily disturbed by a variety of east-west aligned services although an historic brick culvert (1) situated 1.3m north of the church partially survived the later truncations. It consisted of a single header width brick wall, 5 courses high which was abutted at its uppermost north face by a horizontal capping of on-edge bricks.
- 3.1.5 A single burial tomb (2) built of brick and with a vaulted roof construction was encountered within the churchyard. This measured 0.82m in width and was observed to a depth of at least 1.14m. It lay beneath 0.2m of rubble and a 0.08m thickness of tarmac path. The structure was filled with a mixed mid brown clay silt which was found throughout the churchyard. No human remains were found within the structure at this depth.
- 3.1.6 A red brick foundation (6) located at the western edge of the churchyard is likely to be part of the extant western churchyard wall left below ground when a gateway was installed to access the Church Centre (Fig. 2 and 3). Like the churchyard wall, Wall 6 was 0.36m wide and aligned north-south.
- 3.1.7 Wall 6 sat directly on top of a earlier limestone wall foundation (3) that was similarly orientated, randomly coursed and bonded with a creamy lime mortar. The edge of Wall 6 followed that of Wall 3 on the east side although on the western edge Wall 3 protruded by a further 0.18m. The truncated upper surface of Wall 3 survived at 52.17 m OD. This structure was at least 0.64m deep and continued below the base of the service trench (Plate.1).
- 3.1.8 Wall 4 ran parallel to and 1.75m to the west of Wall 3 and was similarly constructed of irregularly shaped and sized limestone blocks. It too was fairly substantial in width and depth continuing in depth beyond the base of the trench (Figs 3 and 4).
- 3.1.9 Wall 5, a further limestone built wall, lying 0.8m to the west of Wall 4 was of an identical thickness to Wall 4 and a similar construction and orientation. However, the lime mortar used in Wall 5 was of a noticeably lighter, more yellow colour. Both walls had been truncated to a height of 51.93m OD (Plate.5).
- 3.1.10 A loose dark grey sandy silt deposit (10) appeared to have been used to backfill the voids between Walls 3, 4 and 5. Above deposit 10 sitting directly upon Walls 4 and 5 an east-west aligned brick built culvert (8) was revealed. Structure 8 was constructed of red bricks capped with slate and ceramic tile and bonded with a cream lime mortar for the majority of its length. A presumed soak-away at its eastern extent was pointed in a hard, dark, cement-rich, waterproof mortar.
- 3.1.11 The stratigraphic sequence at this western extent of the trench (Fig.4) was completed above Structure 8 by a re-deposited garden soil (9), a limestone aggregate sub-base (11) and concrete paving slabs (12).

## 3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Fragments of brick and roofing tile were retrieved from the core of Wall 4 and brick fragments from Wall 5. These finds were not retained but were spot dated as 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century in date (Pers. Com. John Cotter, OA).
- 3.2.2 No in situ human burials were uncovered during the works but a relatively small assemblage of loose dis-articulated human bone (charnel) was collected from the excavation across the churchyard. This was re-interred in the trench before it was backfilled.



### 3.3 Environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the watching brief.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 A relatively small assemblage of human remains, in the form of charnel, was recorded from the churchyard during the works. These remains were reburied in the trench following a simple prayer ceremony from an official of the church. Vaulted brick Structure 2 was impacted by the works although the trench was not sufficiently deep to impact on the burial that it presumably contained. However, the fact that the tomb was filled with generic graveyard fill may suggest that it may have been disturbed on a previous occasion and may not actually have contained human remains.
- 4.1.2 Wall 6 is likely to be a foundation remnant of the current extant western churchyard wall which sits upon and follows the alignment of the earlier limestone Wall 3. The depth and thickness of this earlier wall is indicative of an external supporting wall of a substantial building of potentially more than a single storey rather than a simple precursor of a boundary wall.
- 4.1.3 Walls 4 and 5, dated from brick and tile fragments retrieved from their fabric to the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries or later would appear to have formed a contemporary structure with Wall 3 in terms of their alignment and build. It seems likely that they were leveled at the same time being backfilled in a single event with deposit 10. Whether Wall 3 pre-dated Walls 4 and 5 is unclear.
- 4.1.4 These walls appear to represent the remains of a building that pre-dated Mr Twitty's Almshouse (1709) situated immediately to the south and it is probable that they run beneath the almshouse building. Unlike the later almshouse the structure implied by these walls follows the orientation of the church itself in terms of its north-south alignment and presumably represents the remains of an earlier building related to the church.



APPENDIX A. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context	Type	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Length (m)	Comments	Finds	Date
1	Structure	0.4	0.55	>0.5	Culvert Red/orange bricks 230x100x60mm (9 x 4 x 2 3/8") Cream/yellow lime mortar		
2	Structure	>1.24	0.82	>0.6	Vaulted Tomb Red/orange bricks 235x110x70mm (9 1/4 x 4 1/4 x 2 3/4") Light grey lime mortar		
3	Wall	>0.72	0.36	>0.6	Limestone blocks Cream lime mortar		
4	Wall	>0.64	0.42-0.44	>0.64	Limestone blocks Cream lime mortar	CBM	C16-17
5	Wall	>0.7	0.42	>0.6	Limestone blocks Yellow/cream lime mortar	CBM	C16-17
6	Wall	0.22	0.36	>0.35	Red bricks 220x110x70mm (8 5/8 x 4 3/8 x 2 3/8") Cream lime mortar		
7	Structure	>0.4	0.9		Modern service		
8	Structure	<0.55	>0.4	>4.3	Drain/soakaway Red/purple bricks 230x102x65mm (9 x 4 x 2 1/2") Cream lime mortar/Dark brown cement mortar		
9	Layer	0.36			Garden soil Dark brown/grey Silt clay		
10	Layer	>0.6			Backfill deposit Loose dark grey Sand/silt		
11	Layer	0.14			Sub-base for paving		
12	Layer	0.06			Concrete paving		



## APPENDIX B. REFERENCES

- Munby J.T. 2012      *Church of St Helen, Abingdon. Archaeological Recording Specification*
- OA 2006              *St Helen's Church, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, Archaeological Excavation and Watching Brief Report. Client Report*
- OAU 1999            *St Helen's Church Abingdon. Archaeological Appraisal of proposed Re-ordering. Client Report*



## APPENDIX C. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name:	St.Helen's Church, Abingdon, Oxfordshire
Site code:	ABHLN 12
Grid reference:	Centred at NGR SU 4985 9608
Type of watching brief:	Watching brief on the excavation of a service trench.
Date and duration of project:	30 <sup>th</sup> January to 2 <sup>nd</sup> February 2012
Area of site:	38m long trench, 0.5m wide.
Summary of results:	A brick vaulted tomb and 3 post medieval limestone walls from a structure presumed to pre-date the construction of Almshouses on the site built in 1709. No in situ burials were revealed but some loose dis-articulated bone was noted.
Location of archive:	The archive will be lodged with the Oxfordshire County Museum Service.





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Figure 1: Site location





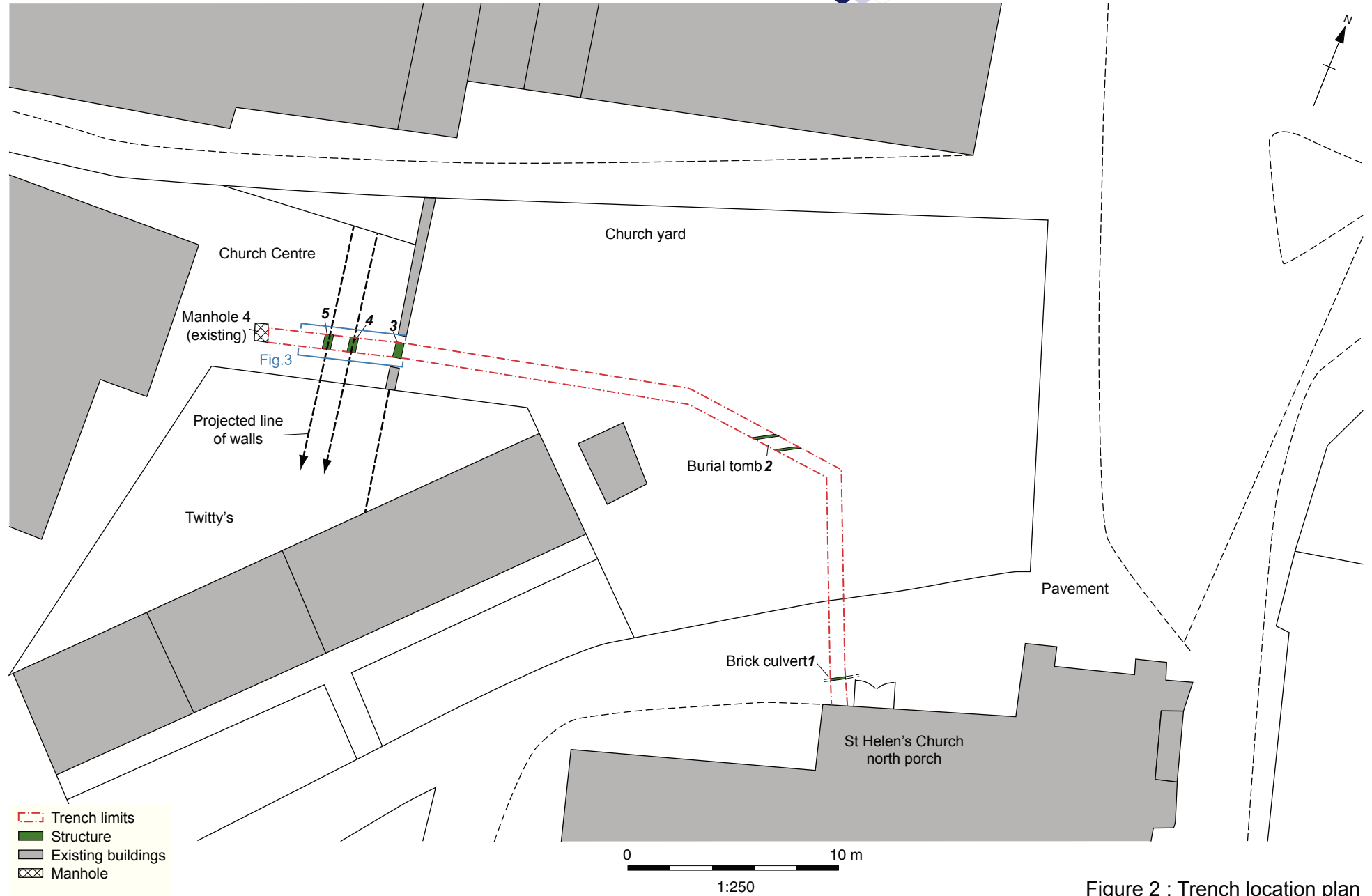


Figure 2 : Trench location plan



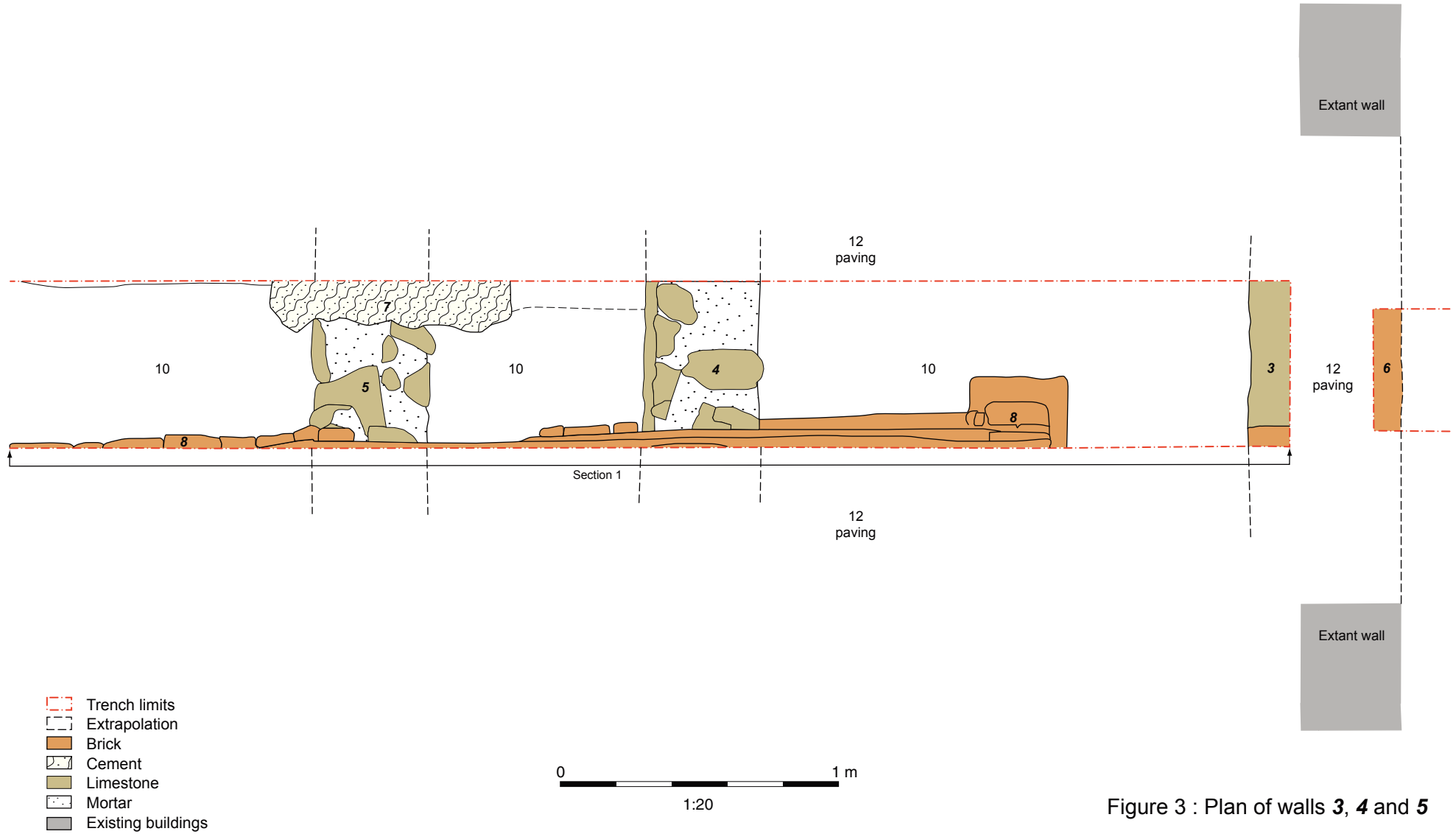
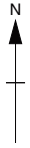
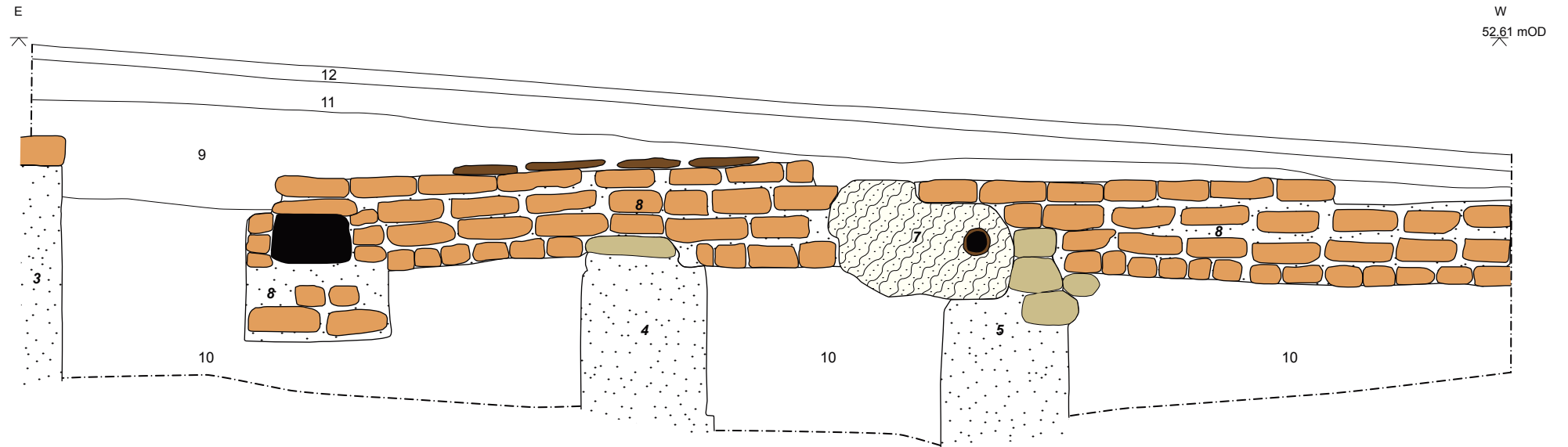


Figure 3 : Plan of walls 3, 4 and 5





- Void
- Brick
- Cement
- Limestone
- Mortar
- Tile

Figure 4: Section 1 - North facing





Plate 1 - Walls 3 and 6 (above)  
view to west



Plate 2 - Walls 5 (foreground), 4 and 3  
view to south east







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